

## Scattering And Gathering: Images Of History And Prophecy (Part One)

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*“There is a time to scatter stones. And there’s a time to gather them.”*  
—Ecclesiastes 3:5; *New International Reader’s Version*

“Gather” and “scatter” make a couple frequently encountered in the Scriptures. In Matthew 12:30, Christ clarifies that, from His viewpoint, gathering and scattering are opposites and are therefore mutually exclusive: “Anyone who is not for Me is really against Me; anyone who does not help Me gather is really scattering” (*Good News Translation* [GNT]; see also Luke 11:23). You cannot do both at once.

However, as Ecclesiastes 3:5 avers, it is possible to scatter and gather at different times.<sup>1</sup> Through the prophet Jeremiah, God announces that He does just that—scatters today and gathers tomorrow: “I scattered My people, but I will gather them and guard them as a shepherd guards his flock” (Jeremiah 31:10, *GNT*). God “scattered over the whole earth” the descendants of Ham, Japheth, and Shem (Genesis 9:19, *New International Version* [NIV]). Later, He scattered the House of Israel, using the Assyrian as His agent (II Kings 17:7-18). Still later, He employed the Babylonian to scatter the folk of Judah—all but the “poorest of the land” (II Kings 25:12), a pitiful remnant.

Finally, He hired the Romans to disperse the Jews from Jerusalem and surrounding territories. In doing so, they “destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city” (Matthew 22:7). They carried at least some of the accouterments of the Temple service to Rome. Someone disassembled the altar. The blood sacrifices ceased. The *diaspora* commenced in earnest. Yes, indeed, yesterday, God did plenty of scattering.

### Sow First, Reap Later

Just as surely as the garnering follows the sowing, God gathers into one what He has earlier widely broadcast. Gathering comes after scattering. Deuteronomy 29 and 30 indicate the sequence. The narrative in Deuteronomy 29:22-28 tells us so much about God’s gathering of His people:

The generation to come—your descendants who will rise up after you, as well as the foreigner who will come from distant places—will see the afflictions of that land and the illnesses that the Lord has brought on it. The whole land will be covered with brimstone, salt, and burning debris; it will not be planted nor will it sprout or produce grass. It will resemble the destruction of Sodom . . . , which the Lord destroyed in His intense anger. Then all the nations will ask, “Why has the Lord done all this to this land? What is this fierce, heated display of anger all about?” Then people will say, “Because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their ancestors, which He made with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods they did not know and that He did not permit them to worship. That is why the Lord’s anger erupted against this land, bringing on it all the curses written in this scroll. So the Lord has uprooted them from their land in anger,

wrath, and great rage and has deported them to another land, as is clear today.” (*New English Translation* [NET])

The last phrase of verse 28, “as is clear today,” is an important time marker. The GNT renders it, “where they are today.” The *New Living Translation* [NLT] has it, “where they still live today.” Translator Robert Alter puts it, “as on this day.”<sup>2</sup>

In the light of that phrase, consider that the people to whom Moses spoke were not then scattered, not uprooted. Their land was not one of “brimstone, salt, and burning debris.” Nor does that description fit the lands to which the Assyrians exiled the ancient House of Israel, for the areas south of the Caspian Sea are reasonably well-watered. Further, the terminology of the passage cannot describe the lands to which Israel migrated, lands that are among the most favored on earth: the productive lands of Northern Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

By using this short phrase, Moses indicates that he speaks of a “generation to come” (verse 22), one in the distant future, even beyond Israel’s circumstances today. He is seeing into the time of Jacob’s Trouble, when Israel’s land, ravaged by war, would become environmentally degraded in the extreme. Only then, in this period of extreme distress, will the lands Israel occupies come to resemble ancient Sodom, destroyed by God long ago (Genesis 19).<sup>3</sup>

Those of the “generation” of which Moses speaks, whether Israelite or Gentile, understand that the vast desolation they witness is the result of Israel’s idolatry, in violation of the covenant (verses 25-26). Moses describes a time beyond our present circumstances when God will have “uprooted” apostate Israel from the lands to which He scattered her centuries before, the lands to which ancient Israel migrated. In short, Moses sees a land that has “vomited out its inhabitants” (Leviticus 18:25).<sup>4</sup>

### **Uprooted and Replanted**

The verb “uprooted” (verse 28) evokes the striking image of pulling up plants from their roots.<sup>5</sup> It virtually always appears in contexts of God’s wrathful action against a sinning people, as in Ezekiel’s lamentation for the princes of Israel, recorded in Ezekiel 19:10-14:

Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard planted by the water, fruitful and full of branches by reason of abundant water. Its strong stems became rulers’ scepters; it towered aloft among the thick boughs; it was seen in its height with the mass of its branches. But the vine was plucked up in fury, cast down to the ground; the east wind dried up its fruit; they were stripped off and withered. As for its strong stem, fire consumed it. Now it is planted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty land. And fire has gone out from the stem of its shoots, has consumed its fruit, so that there remains in it no strong stem, no scepter for ruling. (*English Standard Version* [ESV])

In verse 12, God angrily plucks up the vine whose stems have grown into “rulers’ scepters,” towering above others. The image of the highly productive, well-watered vine—perhaps “influential” might fit as well—transplanted into a “dry and thirsty land” (verse 13), is reminiscent of the Sodom-like land Moses mentions in Deuteronomy 29:23.

It is clear, then, that Deuteronomy 29 describes God’s *future* scattering, His uprooting of Israelites from their burned-out land during the time of Jacob’s Trouble. This apostasy on Israel’s part, and the resulting furious uprooting, forms the context of Deuteronomy 30:2-4. Here, however, by referring to

“you and your descendants” in verse 2, Moses expands his audience to include the people standing before him as well as those of a future generation.<sup>6</sup>

When you have experienced all these things, both the blessings and the curses I have set before you, you will reflect upon them in all the nations where the Lord your God has banished you. Then if you and your descendants turn to the Lord your God and obey Him with your whole mind and being just as I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will reverse your captivity and have pity on you. He will turn and gather you from all the peoples among whom He has scattered you. Even if your exiles are in the most distant land, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. (NET)

Deuteronomy 30:3 lists three actions God will take upon Israel’s repentance, only the last of which involves any regathering:

1. He reverses, that is, backs out or turns around, the people’s captivity.<sup>7</sup>
2. He “turns” (that is, returns) to His people.
3. Once back with them, He (re)gathers them.

The Hebrew text uses the verb *shûb* twice in verse 3, the translators rendering it “reverse” the first time and “turn” the second. It means “to turn back,” “to return,” or “to go back.” Its first use appears at Genesis 3:19, where God tells Adam he will return into the dust from which he came.

The point is this: To God, gathering is a purposeful and overt *reversal* of the current situation. Upon seeing Israel’s changed (or changing) attitude—her repentance—God reciprocates by altering His own course, backing out the scattering He imposed earlier. Additionally, God’s is not a timid response to Israel’s repentance: As He says in verse 4: “If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will fetch you” (*Revised Standard Version* [RSV]). He will go where He needs to go to gather them.

### **Fetch, Fido**

For emphasis, Moses uses two verbs at the end of verse 4: “gather” and “fetch.” “Gather” is *qâbas*, the most frequently used verb for “gather” in the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> Of its 127 occurrences, not surprisingly, almost half (60) appear in the Major and Minor Prophets. *Qâbas*’ first use is in Genesis 41:35, where Joseph recommends to Pharaoh that he “gather all the food” during the seven years of plenty against those years of famine to follow. God sees gathering as a carefully planned action, diligently, systemically, and methodically executed with sustained discipline. In this case, the gathering is implemented by Joseph, a type of Christ.

The second verb, “fetch,” is quite interesting. It is *lâqah*, which means “to take,” “fetch,” “lead,” “conduct,” or “carry off.” When combined with the concept of scattering, it carries the notion of assuming active leadership of the returnees. The Hebrew *lâqah* and English “fetch” share much the same meaning. When a dog fetches a stick, he actively runs after it, seeks it out, and then carries it back posthaste. Likewise, in the first use of *lâqah* (Genesis 2:15), God “took” the newly created Adam and put him into the Garden of Eden, as if He led him there. Importantly, this first use carries the notion of leading a person to the best of lands, in this case, the Garden of Eden.

*The Complete Jewish Bible* conveys this notion of active pursuit, saying that God will “go there and get” the people of Israel, restoring them to the Land of Promise. *The Message* carries the same idea: God will “come back and pick up the pieces from all the places where you were scattered.” Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, will not delegate the work of regathering, nor will He gather from a distance. Rather, He will go to the nations and lead the remnant back, assertively participating in the gathering process. This “hands-on” aspect of involvement is reminiscent of God’s ongoing and never-failing leadership of the Children of Israel in the wilderness by cloud and pillar (see Exodus 13:20-22).

## Seeking and Searching

The evident stress on God’s personal engagement in gathering suggests another scripture, this one underscoring the purpose of Christ’s work: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). The verb “seek”<sup>9</sup> has much the same force as “fetch” or “gather.” Its first use, in Matthew 2:13, refers to Herod’s seeking Christ as an infant to kill Him. In that passage, the ESV uses the verb “search,” indicating Herod’s level of commitment to destroying Christ.

Ezekiel 34, where the prophet contrasts the self-indulgent prophets with the selfless One, the Good Shepherd of John 10, focuses on both ideas—seeking and searching:

Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat . . . but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, . . . the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As I live, says the Lord God, because My sheep have become a prey, and My sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd; and because My shepherds have not searched My sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: . . . Behold, I am against the shepherds. . . .

“For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I Myself will search for My sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out My sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed . . .” (Ezekiel 34:2-13, 16; RSV)

Does this passage stress the importance of seeking *and* searching to the gathering process? Indeed, it does. The Hebrew verb for “gather” appears only once (in verse 13). But, two different verbs for “seek” appear four times and two different verbs for “search” also appear four times—in aggregate, eight searchings and seekings in the passage. God clearly looks for responsible shepherds to seek actively for stray sheep, to the point of searching them out. This is what Christ will do when He sets His hand to gathering His sheep: “After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him” (John 10:4, *NLT*).<sup>10</sup>

Turning to scattering in the next issue, we will learn, at least in general terms, where God will be searching and seeking for the Israelites He gathers.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this passage, the Hebrew verb translated “gather” (King James Version [KJV]) is *knas* (Strong’s #3664). It appears 11 times in the Old Testament, where the KJV translators render it “gather” (5x), “gather together” (4x), “heap up” (1x), and “wrap” (1x). Its first use is in I Chronicles 22:2.

<sup>2</sup> The Five Book of Moses, Norton, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew feminine noun translated “overthrow” in verse 23 always refers in some way to the destruction of Sodom: Deuteronomy 29:23; Isaiah 1:7-9; 13:19; Jeremiah 49:18; 50:40; and Amos 4:11. The noun is *mahp?kh* (Strong’s #4144).

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references are to the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew verb is *ntash* (Strong’s #5428), appearing 21 times in the Old Testament, the first time in Deuteronomy 29:28. The KJV translators render it “pluck up” or “pluck out” (13x), “destroyed,” “forsaken,” “routed,” “routed up,” “routed out,” “pulled out,” and “utterly” (each 1x). It is not surprising that 11 of the 21 occurrences of *ntash* appear in Jeremiah—42.9%.

<sup>6</sup> Compare the audience indicated at Deuteronomy 29:22.

<sup>7</sup> This reversal is equivalent, at least in part, to the “rescue” promised by God in Ezekiel 34:10: “I will rescue My sheep from their mouth, so that they will no longer be food for them.” (Several translations use the verb “deliver,” as the New American Standard Bible: “I will deliver My flock from their mouth...”) The Hebrew verb is *nsal* (Strong’s #5337), appearing 213 times in the Old Testament, the first time in Genesis 31:9. The KJV translators render it “deliver” (179x), “recover” (5x), rid (3x), “rescue,” “spoil,” “at all,” “take out” (each 2x), along with 16 miscellaneous translations. *Nsal* also appears in Ezekiel 34:12, 27. It may not be surprising that *nsal*, referring to the act of delivering, appears a total of 43 times in the Major Prophets (20.2% of its uses).

<sup>8</sup> The verb “gather” here is *qbas* (Strong’s #6908). The KJV translators render it “gather” (sometimes “gather up,” “gather out,” or “gather together”) (116x), assemble (6x), “heap,” “resort,” “surely” (each 1x), along with seven miscellaneous translations.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek verb is *z?te?* (Strong’s #2212), appearing 119 times in the New Testament, where the translators of the KJV render it “seek” (or “seek for”) (105x), “go about” (4x), “desire” (3x), with seven miscellaneous renderings.

<sup>10</sup> The image Christ uses in Matthew 23:37 suggests His loving care in gathering His Israel:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (ESV)

The verb translated by the term “gathered together” is *episynagō*? (Strong’s #1996). *Episynagō*? appears seven times in the New Testament, where the KJV translators render it “gather together” (5x) and “gather” (2x). Its first appearance is here in Matthew 23:37.